

# White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

By Peggy McIntosh

Through work to bring materials from Women's Studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are over-privileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They may say they will work to improve women's status, in the society, the university, or the curriculum, but they can't or won't support the idea of lessening men's. Denials which amount to taboos surround the subject of advantages which men gain from women's disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully acknowledged, lessened or ended.

Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon, I realized that, since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of white privilege that was similarly denied and protected. As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way

to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.

Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. As we in Women's Studies work to reveal male privilege and ask men to give up some of their power, so one who writes about white privilege must ask, "Having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?"

After I realized the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive.

I began to understand why we are justly seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence.

I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group.

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow "them" to be more like "us."

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions which I think in my case *attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege* than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can see, my African American co-workers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come

into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place and line of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
6. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
8. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
9. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who

can cut my hair.

10. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
12. I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
16. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world’s majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
18. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to “the person in charge,” I will be facing a person of my race.
19. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been

singled out because of my race.

20. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children’s magazines featuring people of my race.
21. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
22. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
23. I can choose public accommodations without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
24. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
25. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
26. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in “flesh” color and have them more less match my skin.

I repeatedly forgot each of the realizations on this list until I wrote it down. For me, white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are

Wellesley College  
106 Central Street  
Wellesley, MA 02481-8203  
Tel 781 283 2399  
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true, this is not such a free country; one’s life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own.

In unpacking this invisible knapsack of white privilege, I have listed conditions of daily experience that I once took for granted. Nor did I think of any of these perquisites as bad for the holder. I now think that we need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant and destructive.

I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a pattern of assumptions that were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turf, and I was among those who could control the turf. *My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make.* I could think of myself as belonging in major ways and of making social systems work for me. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I could also criticize it fairly freely.

In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made inconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit, in turn,

upon people of color.

For this reason, the word “privilege” now seems to me misleading. We usually think of privilege as being a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth or luck. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work systematically to overempower certain groups. Such privilege simply *confers dominance* because of one’s race or sex.

I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power conferred systemically. Power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate. But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably damaging. Some, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be the norm in a just society. Others, like the privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups.

We might at least start by distinguishing between positive advantages, which we can work to spread, and negative types of advantage, which unless rejected will always reinforce our present hierarchies. For example, the feeling that one belongs within the human circle, as Native Americans say, should not be seen as privilege for a few. Ideally it is an *unearned entitlement*. At present, since only a few have it, it is an *unearned advantage* for them. This paper results from a process of coming to

see that some of the power that I originally saw as attendant on being a human being in the United States consisted in unearned advantage and conferred dominance.

The question is:  
“Having described  
white privilege, what  
will I do to end it?”

I have met very few men who are truly distressed about systemic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance. And so one question for me and others like me is whether we will be like them, or whether we will get truly distressed, even outraged, about unearned race advantage and conferred dominance, and, if so, what will we do to lessen them. In any case, we need to do more work in identifying how they actually affect our daily lives. Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the U.S. think that racism doesn’t affect them because they are not people of color, they do not see “whiteness” as a racial identity. In addition, since race and sex are not the only advantaging systems at work, we need similarly to examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.

Difficulties and dangers surrounding the task of finding parallels are many. Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advantages

Wellesley College  
106 Central Street  
Wellesley, MA 02481-8203  
Tel 781 283 2399  
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associated with them should not be seen as the same. In addition, it is hard to disentangle aspects of unearned advantage which rest more on social class, economic class, race, religion, sex, and ethnic identity than on other factors. Still, all of the oppressions are interlocking, as the Combahee River Collective Statement of 1977 continues to remind us eloquently.

One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant group one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.

Disapproving of the systems won't be enough to change them. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitudes. But a “white” skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us. Individual acts can palliate, but cannot end, these problems.

To redesign social systems, we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool

here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects. Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance while denying that *systems* of dominance exist.

It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already.

Although systemic change takes many decades, there are pressing questions for me and I imagine for some others like me if we raise our daily consciousness on the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base.

\*This is an authorized excerpt of McIntosh's original white

privilege article, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies,” Working Paper 189 (1988), Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College, MA, 02481.

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Wellesley College  
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Wellesley, MA 02481-8203  
Tel 781 283 2399  
[www.nationalseedproject.org](http://www.nationalseedproject.org)

## **Some Notes for Facilitators on Presenting My White Privilege Papers**

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1. My work is not about blame, shame, guilt, or whether one is a “nice person.” It’s about observing, realizing, thinking systemically and personally. It is about seeing privilege, the “up-side” of oppression and discrimination. It is about unearned advantage, which can also be described as exemption from discrimination.
2. Please do not generalize from my papers. They are about my experience, not about the experiences of all white people in all times and places and circumstances. The paragraph in each paper before the list begins says this, and also allays fears of white people that a paper on white privilege will call them racist.
3. Keep “the lists” in their autobiographical contexts. It is a matter of scholarly integrity and accuracy not to claim more than I did. I compared my own circumstances with some of those of African American women I worked with. Being clear about this will actually increase your effectiveness as a facilitator. You can say, “This is from just one white woman coming to see she’s white in her time and place and workspace. . . .She’s writing about herself, not you.”
4. The work goes best when you draw on participants’ own personal experiences, not their opinions. Opinions invite argumentation. Telling about experience invites listening. Opinions tend to bring on conflict, whereas shared experiences tend to elicit curiosity and empathy. When participants move from experiential testimony to opinion, bring them back, knowing that most schooling discourages testimony.
5. When exploring privilege, it is useful to use “Serial Testimony,” a disciplined mode in which each participant gets to respond in turn, uninterrupted, for, say, one minute, timed. I call this “the autocratic administration of time in the service of democratic distribution of time.”
6. But without rigorous use of a watch or timer, Serial Testimony can be as undemocratic as any other form of discussion.
7. Understand that every participant has an intricate “politics of location” (Adrienne Rich) within the systems of social power. For example, all people in a workshop or class will have a lifetime of experiences of both advantage and disadvantage, empowerment and disempowerment, overwhelming or subtle, within many different systems of power.
8. Recognize that all people are both located in systems and also uniquely individual.
9. Co-presentations and panels of people speaking about their experiences one after another can be very effective. I do not usually arrange for “dialogues,” since I feel they are often a veiled form of debating and fighting, rather than listening and learning. I discourage “crosstalk” after panels unless it further clarifies and respects what the panelists have said. This is what Peter Elbow called playing the “The Believing Game.”

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106 Central Street  
Wellesley, MA 02481-8203  
Tel 781 283 2399  
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10. My lists of the unearned privileges I have relative to my colleagues are not “check lists” or “questionnaires.” They are not “confessional readings.”

11. Please draw attention to the specificity of “my sample.” I compared my circumstances only with what I knew of the circumstances of my African-American female colleagues in the same building and line of work. This sample is very specific with regard to race, sex, region, location, workplace, vocation and nation.

12. Behind and within my examples are institutions that bear on my experience such as schools, the police, the IRS, the media, the law, medicine, business.

13. Do not get trapped in definitions of privilege and power. They lack nuances and flexibility.

14. Invite people to make their own autobiographical lists of privilege, for example, about:

|                    |                  |                               |
|--------------------|------------------|-------------------------------|
| Sexual Orientation | Employment       | Families' relation to         |
| Class              | Physical ability | education, money              |
| Region             | Handedness       | housing and                   |
| Religion           | Language         | neighborhoods                 |
| Gender             | Nation of origin | Families' languages of origin |
| Gender identity    | Ethnicity        |                               |

15. Beware of gym-exercises which position people in only one aspect of their identities, asking them to step forward or backward from a baseline at a given prompt.

16. Urge participants to avoid self righteousness and preaching to family and friends about privilege, especially if it is something they have just discovered themselves.

17. Explain the word “systemic.” Help participants or students to think about what it is to see society systemically, and structurally, rather than only in terms of individuals making individual choices.

18. Think about why U.S. people, especially White people, have trouble seeing systemically. Explain the myth of meritocracy: that the unit of society is the individual and that whatever one ends up with must be whatever that individual wanted, worked for, earned, and deserved. Why do you think this myth survives so successfully, suppressing knowledge of systemic oppression and especially of its “upside,” systemic privilege?

19. Help participants to strengthen three intellectual muscles: a) the ability to see in terms of systems as well as in terms of individuals; b) the ability to see how systemic discrimination, the downside, is matched by systemic privilege, the upside; c) the ability to see many different kinds of privilege systems.

20. You can argue that work on privilege in schools and universities makes people smarter, not necessarily better. Academic institutions do not claim that making us better is their primary goal, but accurate thinking is a goal they claim to foster.

**When I present, or co-present with a person of color, on Privilege Systems, whether or not I am the first to speak, I usually:**

- tell how I came to see men’s privilege and their obliviousness to it, which made me see laterally to my own race privilege and my obliviousness to it;
- read some examples from my white privilege list, and sometimes read some of my heterosexual privilege list, class privilege list, Christian privilege list, and lists of privilege relative to Asian Americans, Indigenous people, Latino/as, etc.;
- analyze some of the different misreadings of my paper by white people and people of color;
- raise the question of how I can use unearned advantage to weaken systems of unearned advantage, and why I would want to.

**The co-presenter and I take equal time to testify about how we came to see privilege systems in and around us. After this, we use Serial Testimony. We form either small circles of people, or pairs, to respond, in turn, uninterrupted, for one minute each, to the following prompts:**

Round one: What are one or more ways in which you’ve had unearned disadvantage in your life?

Round two: What are one or more ways in which you’ve had unearned advantage in your life?

Round three: What is it like for you to sit here and talk about and hear about these experiences of unearned advantage and disadvantage?

Round three is like a debrief in itself. Any further debrief should be only on new learnings from the exercise. Random discussion of the exercise usually leads away from experience to generalizations and repetitions of the same opinions people came into the session with.

Some people “get” the idea of systemic privilege and ask “But what can I do?” My answer is, you can use unearned advantage to weaken systems of unearned advantage. I see white privilege as a bank account that I did not ask for, but that I can choose to spend. People with privilege have far more power than we have been taught to realize, within the myth of meritocracy. Participants can brainstorm about how to use unearned assets to share power; these may include time, money, energy, literacy, mobility, leisure, connections, spaces, housing, travel opportunities. Using these assets may lead to key changes in other behaviors as well, such as paying attention, making associations, intervening, speaking up, asserting and deferring, being alert, taking initiative, doing ally and advocacy work, lobbying, campaigning, protesting, organizing, and recognizing and acting against both the external and internalized forms of oppression and privilege.